



Native Grass Series

Switchgrass

Big Bluestem

Little Bluestem

Indiangrass

Eastern Gamagrass

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United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Native Grasses of Louisiana

Fact Sheet

Switchgrass

Description

Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) is a warm-season perennial bunchgrass that grows 3 to 6 feet tall. It can be distinguished from other warm season grasses, even when plants are young, by the white patch of hair at the point where the leaf attaches to the stem. The stem is round, hollow, and usually has a reddish tint. The seed head is spreading and open. Switchgrass produces a deep, extensive, fibrous root system and short rhizomes. It is most commonly found in prairie lowlands, but will grow under a wide range of climatic conditions.



Adaptability

Switchgrass is winter and drought hardy, acid tolerant, and is adapted statewide. It grows in all soil textures and drainage classes. It is the most adapted warm-season grass to flooded and very poorly drained conditions but does best on fertile, well-drained soils. 'Alamo' and 'Blackwell' are the recommended varieties in the state.



Photograph provided by Dr. Jimmy C. Henning, University of Kentucky



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Establishment

Planting can be done anytime between December and May, when moisture and growing conditions are favorable. The optimum planting time is February 1 - May 15. It should be seeded into a well prepared, firm seedbed that is free of competition from other vegetation. The seeding rate for a monoculture is 5-9 pounds of Pure Live Seed (PLS) per acre.

When seeded as a mixture, the rate is adjusted according to the desired percentage. Switchgrass is clean, free flowing, and can be seeded with a drill or by broadcast method. Seed should be planted ¼ inch deep. Phosphorus and potassium should be applied according to a soil test before or at seeding. Nitrogen should not be used at seeding time.

Nitrogen fertilization should be delayed until seedlings have reached a height of 4 to 6 inches to prevent excessive use of fertilizer by competing vegetation. If weeds become a problem, the stand may be mowed when plants reach a height of 6 inches.

Management

Controlling weeds in the establishment year is important. Do not graze newly established plantings of switchgrass except when good stands are present. Switchgrass should not be grazed until it reaches 12 inches in height. During the growing season, rotational grazing is recommended. The cattle should be removed when the grass is grazed to a 6 to 8 inch height. However, it can be grazed continuously as long as a minimum height of 8-12 inches is maintained. Dormant stands can be grazed at any time during the winter. Switchgrass can be burned every 3-5 years to stimulate growth and reduce mulch accumulations. Avoid clipping or grazing switchgrass 30 days before first frost. Switchgrass will usually begin growth in the spring earlier than introduced species bermudagrass and bahiagrass. This species has excellent forage potential averaging three to six tons per acre. When managed as a hay crop, allow 45 days between harvests to maintain a productive stand.

Uses

Switchgrass provides good warm-season pasture and high quality hay for livestock. Switchgrass provides excellent nesting and fall and winter cover for pheasants, quail, and rabbits. The seeds provide food for pheasants, quail, turkeys, doves, and songbirds. It is an excellent native landscape plant that requires little or no fertilizer. It is extremely tolerant of drought conditions.

Where To Get Help

For more information about switchgrass, contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service office or visit following websites:

<http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov>

<http://www.la.nrcs.usda.gov>

